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CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH  
ENGAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL, TRUST AND TIE STRENGTH IN A  
SAMPLE OF ECUADORIAN AND PORTUGUESE MILLENNIALS

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# **Cross-cultural Differences in Electronic Word-of-Mouth Engagement: The Role of Social Capital, Trust and Tie Strength in a Sample of Ecuadorian and Portuguese Millennials**

## **Abstract**

Nowadays SNSs grow in importance and still cross-cultural studies about the factors that influence the engagement of electronic word-of-mouth are limited. Therefore, this study explores the influence of social relationship variables on eWOM behaviors, between Ecuador and Portugal. An online survey was conducted among 145 Ecuadorian and 47 Portuguese, Generation Y, Facebook users. The findings displayed for Portuguese users, eWOM key motivating factors for opinion seeking is bridging social capital, while for sharing information bonding social capital and tie strength. Contrarily in Ecuador bridging social capital influenced three eWOM behaviors. For both cultures, bonding social capital predicted the desire to share.

Keywords: eWOM, social network sites (SNSs), cultural dimensions, Portugal, Ecuador.

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## **Introduction**

Nowadays, the digital world has expanded to different dimensions, not only individually and socially but also along the side of business given by the accelerated improvement of the Internet technology. With the development of the Web 2.0 and social media, consumers are now able to create, edit and share online information cross borders (Cormode and Krishnamurthy 2008). Due to its higher reach, effectiveness and how fast information can be shared from SNSs users, eWOM has become a subject of research. Some studies suggested online consumer behavior is culturally shaped, in view of how consumers interact in the web cultural traits can be discovered and associated (Fong and Burton 2008; Pfeil, Zapharis, and Siang-Ang 2006; Seidenspinner and Theuner 2007; Sun and Wang 2010; Chu and Choi 2011; Richard and Habibi 2016). Although previous research provides initial insights into cultural influences in the online environment, the theoretical knowledge is still limited in this field, especially in analyzing and comparing eWOM across cultures over time. For this reason, a further experimental investigation is needed to reinforce the knowledge of how and in which level culture influences eWOM, and social activities in SNSs.

The purpose of this study is to understand social relationships in SNSs within eWOM and the culture of its users with a focus on the influence of the variables: social capital, tie strength and trust. This research will attempt to recognize social factors which stimulate consumer's commitment to eWOM while describing and analyzing differences between Portugal and Ecuador. The findings of the present study will contribute to the literature on cross-cultural studies and global marketing. Also, it will extend the literature in consumer behavior, eWOM and it will support the development and implementation of effective marketing strategies. The report will describe first the theoretical background of electronic word-of-mouth and the social relationship between the variables aforementioned. Subsequently, the methodology is explained and the results obtained are described. The paper finally summarizes the main findings and insights and discusses the implications for both future research and practice.

## **Literature Review**

### **eWOM in Social Network Sites**

As defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User-Generated Content”. Social media is playing an increasing role in consumer life’s, 39% of users agree that they use social media to find out more about the product and services they are using or planning to buy. As well, 30% of heavy social users believe that is crucial to interact in SNSs to advocate for their preferred brands (Casey 2017). Similarly, according to Chu and Choi (2011), SNSs have transformed the way users interact with their peers, obtaining product-related interactions and purchase decisions. Park and Jun (2003) expressed the desire which exceeds social, geographical and cultural borders to use social networks is the desire to relate to others. Vollmer and Precourt (2008) agree and state SNSs are crucial to engage in eWOM since users discuss brand-related information within the platform.

Recently, considering the importance of Web 2.0 and with the influence of the Internet, papers have been dedicated to analyzing eWOM (Fong and Burton 2008; Chu and Choi 2011; Hennig-Thurau and Walsh 2003; Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007). Accordingly, eWOM is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003). For example, online channels, such as blogs, consumer review websites and forums, consumer communities, and SNSs (Phelps et al., 2004; Thorson and Rodgers, 2006; Dwyer, 2007; Hung and Yiyan Li, 2007). Several academic articles have indicated that the basic motivations for using SNSs are: social interaction; seeking information; social and emotional support; friendship; a sense of belonging from new and existing relationships (Wellman and Gulia, 1997; Riding and Gefen 2004; Brandtzæg and Heim 2009; Güngör and Ozansoy 2016).

Kudeshia et al. (2017) stated the thriving popularity of SNSs has revolutionized the way word-of-mouth is propagated and consumed in the digital era. Facebook, the focus of this study, is found to be one

of the most popular platforms for connecting close friends rather than meeting new people (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007; Joinson 2008). Worldwide, there are 2.07 billion monthly active Facebook users, as reported by the Q3 2017 Facebook Report. Likewise, 1.37 billion people on average log onto Facebook daily and are considered DAUs, representing an increase of 16% over the last year. In Europe, over 307 million people are on Facebook (Facebook Inc. 2017).

Millennials are considered the driving force of online communication, thanks to their knowledge and understanding in digital media. Indeed, the Generation Y is considered key to the evolution of social media, due to the active role as a source of primary information for their family and acquaintances (Mangold and Smith 2012). Thus, it is critical to understand generation Y's eWOM behaviors since this generation is not only focused on talking about the product but also is capable of driving the success or failure of the brand (Zhang, Abound, and Cobanoglu 2017).

### **Culture and Social Network Sites**

Li et al. (2009) suggest: "the Internet is a global medium, but its content is local to each country". Culture should be considered as an important determinant when analyzing the motivations of the engagement in eWOM. Existing literature has already commenced some research and recognized that cultural dimensions may determine consumer's use of online reviews. Obal and Kunz (2016) came to the conclusion that Asian respondents preferred to rely on online reviewer's advice in comparison to North Americans, which only use it as evidence. Also, Kim et al. (2010) identified that attitude toward SNSs varies depending on the culture of its users. For example, individualistic cultures like the US, users encounter a positive attitude when seeking friends in a pleasant user-friendly way, contrastively, in collectivistic cultures like Korea users use more SNSs for social support, not to enlarge their network. Furthermore, Hofstede (1991, 2001) proposes five dimensions to measure culture: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity and long-term orientation. Due to its relevance to the study, the following measures will be taking into consideration (see Table 1).

	<u>PORTUGAL</u>	<u>ECUADOR</u>
Power Distance (PDI)	63	78
Individualism (IDV) & Collectivism (COL)	27	8
Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)	99	67
Long Term Orientation	28	-

*Table 1. Hofstede's Dimensions for Portugal and Ecuador*

Power distance is defined as “the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede 2017a). In other words, it infers individuals within societies are not equivalent. Ecuador with a score of 78 ranks in a high position of PDI. Similarly, Portuguese culture with a score of 63, believes that hierarchy is culturally accepted. Accordingly, cultures with high-power distance traits can be interpreted to comprise high levels of inequality regarding power and wealth within the society, being most of the time linked to social class. Likewise, in high PDI cultures, people are more confident with personal recommendations, in fact societies are considered more opinion seekers (Dawar, Parker, and Price 1996; Pornpitakpan 2004).

Individualism fixates on the degree in which the community reinforces individual or collective, achievement and interpersonal relationships (Shi and Wang 2011). In other words, it refers to the integration of individual within groups. A low individualism ranking indicates that the community tends to have a more collectivist nature, meaning that people are closer to each other, hence forming close ties with a cluster in the society. Ecuador, with a score of 8, one of the lowest in the world, after Guatemala people's self-image is more defined in terms of “We”, denoting that being part of a group is very important (Hofstede 2017a). Collectivist societies foster strong relationships between members, thus, prioritizing relations over sometimes over tasks. COL combined with high PDI scores, reflects that groups may have strong identities tie to race and class distinctions (Hofstede 2017a; Hofstede 2017b). Portugal with a score of 27, is one of the two collectivist cultures in Europe with Spain (Hofstede 2017b). As mentioned before, in collectivist and high PDI cultures, honesty and thoughts from others are meaningful. Existing literature results from Goodrich et al. (2014) and Laroche et al. (2005) denote that in collectivistic and high-power

distance societies, individuals are more prone to engaged in negative eWOM inside their groups than those in the opposite dimensions.

UAI indicates to what extent members of a culture may feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in ambiguous or unstructured situations. It also describes on how individuals react to the unknown future (Shi and Wang 2011; Hofstede 2017a). UAI is Ecuador's second highest dimension with a score of 67, reflecting that the society has a low level of resilience for uncertainty, therefore creating a rule-oriented society with laws and regulations. Specifically, in Ecuador, emotions are openly expressed and social conservatism prevails. Even though, legislation is extensive; rules are not necessarily followed strictly, since they depend on the decision of power holders. Consequently, the combination of high PDI, UAI, and COL arise in that the status quo of the society will only change when a strong authority leads the society towards change (Hofstede 2017a). Portugal's score 99, is one of the highest in Europe. In this case, cultures with high scores are more inclined to trust experts than regular people. Individuals are more inclined to believe in trusted blogs, websites, product recommendations, and reviews to have more control over the decision-making process (Goodrich and de Mooij 2014; Hofstede 2017b).

The GLOBE is a research program that measures culture among different levels of industry within organizations and 62 different cultures, clustering them into cultural groups. Ecuador is part of the Latin America cluster, the largest of all GLOBE clusters. Cultures belonging to this group are distinctive from others, because of high scores in Power Distance and In-Group Collectivism (GLOBE 2017). Individuals value more what a society "should be" and not necessarily how the common norm is. Additionally, the society values loyalty, pride and aspire to have unity inside organizations and families. According to the data collected in Ecuador, most of the scores range from relatively high to high, except for assertiveness and power distance which range between relatively low and low, demonstrating the aforesaid. Overall, the cluster can be identified as collectivist and family oriented.

Portugal, on the contrary, is part of the Latin Europe cluster. Compared to Latin America most of the cultural practices are between medium scores with the exception of Power Scores (high) and Human



Orientation (low). Overall, societies that are part of this cluster are somewhat male-dominated, not predominantly humane-oriented and experience an unequal distribution of power and status among individuals (GLOBE 2017). Regarding on what a society believes it “should be” Latin Europe ranks on high-performance Orientations, In-Group Collectivism, Future Orientation and Humane Orientation. Further, due to the small differences between cultural practice and societal values scores the communities find current structures, rules, and norms somehow acceptable how they are. Yet, they desire a moderate increase in In-Group and Institutional Collectivism, in order to have more loyalty and cohesiveness in their organizations and families.

Portugal in particular, share similar scores with Ecuador regarding country values of culture visualization. For instance, performance orientation; future orientation and in-group collectivism all three in both countries are above the metric relatively high, considering that for Ecuador future orientation is a little bit higher. Hence, both cultures indicate importance in family and being of a group; plus, a desire to be much more performance and future-oriented (GLOBE 2017). At last, members in collective cultures such as Portugal and Ecuador emphasize interdependence, value harmony, connectedness and in-group memberships.

### **Hypotheses development**

**eWOM behaviors.** SNSs allow users to share information about products and brands, faster than any other platform. Likewise, users are able to share opinions and experiences by creating electronic word-of-mouth, which may involve positive or negatives comments between actual and/or potential buyers (Jalilvand, Esfahani, and Neda 2011). Conceptually, eWOM in SNSs can be analyzed across three behaviors: opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing (Choi et al. 2011; Shu-Chuan and Yoojung 2011; Chu and Choi 2011; King, Racheal, and Bush 2014; Güngör and Ozansoy 2016).

For opinion seekers, SNSs are reliable platforms to view and analyze recommendations made by friends and acquaintances before making the final decision to buy a product or service (Shu-Chuan and Yoojung 2011). Also, opinion seekers are more likely to use eWOM, since its easier and faster to reach for information. Messages can be shared with a higher number of people, allowing brands to have a

broader reach of its product cross-borders (Andreassen and Streukens 2009). Relying on previous research, personal sources are relevant in collective and high-power distance cultures (Dawar et al. 1996; Pornpitakpan 2004). In high PDI cultures like Ecuador and Portugal, people rely more on personal sources of recommendation and favor peer integration. Similarly, due to the preference of consumer to consumer interactivity, there is also perceived a large gap between marketers and consumers (Goodrich and de Mooij 2014; Stump and Gong 2017). Another important cultural indicator that both countries share is collectivism. Ecuador's score is one of the lowest in terms of individualism, meaning that is one of the most collectivist cultures in the world; likewise, Portugal is one the only collective countries in Europe with Spain (Hofstede 2017a/b). Members of collectivist societies are more inclined to connect and participate in SNSs to gain a sense of association, being part of a group and achieve group harmony (Stump and Gong 2017). Besides, individuals look for peer recommendations and are used to meet and have contact with others more frequently. Consequently, COL and High PDI cultures are more likely to participate and share opinions orally and in writing compared to members from IND and Low PDI cultures (de Mooij and Hofstede 2011). Based on the characteristics mentioned above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1a: Portuguese and Ecuadorian users engage in a similar level of opinion seeking behavior on Facebook.*

Opinion giving is another important facet of eWOM in social network sites. Individuals with high levels are considered leaders, likewise they may mentor other's attitudes and behaviors (Feick and Price 1987). Relating the previous with cultural dimensions, it can be inferred that societies with collectivistic behavior and in-group collectivism, like Portugal and Ecuador, value in a great matter cooperative action and resource distribution, even though they perceive that inequalities are present in the society. In addition, individuals value cohesiveness, loyalty and pride in their organizations (Shi and Wang 2011). Portugal is a short-term oriented collectivist culture, where people identify themselves in a self-enhancing way and are more interactive. Ergo, individuals communicate in a more expressive and elaborative way, being firm

opinion giving to peers (Goodrich and de Mooij 2014; Stump and Gong 2017). Consequently, a second hypothesis is proposed:

*H1b: Portuguese users engage in a greater level of opinion giving behavior on Facebook than Ecuadorian users.*

At last, opinion passing is a behavior that occurs presumably in an online context and eases the stream of information. As mentioned before, just with some ‘clicks’ users can share their opinion across the globe (Dellarocas 2003; Norman and Russell 2006). Sun et al. (2006) agree and state that opinion passing is a significant behavior to consider in eWOM since it facilitates the communication between users. Similarly, Shu-Chuan et al. (2011) state that passing information could be considered a medium between opinion seekers and givers. For instance, members of high PDI and collectivists cultures are more likely to share ideas and opinions with their groups (de Mooij and Hofstede 2011). Associating this aspect with the culture of both countries is possible to link the characteristics of the previous behaviors. In addition, considering the high importance of recommendations, information sharing, group inclusiveness the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1c Portuguese and Ecuadorian engage in the same level of opinion passing on Facebook*

**Social Relationships.** In order to understand the core of eWOM is crucial to analyzed and understand the impact of social relationship in SNSs users (Shu-Chuan and Yoojung 2011). According to Brown et al. (2007) there are five dimensions that influence social relationships and WOM as well as eWOM intentions: trust, personal influence, tie strength, homophily and source of credibility. This study will focus on the following social relationship variables: social capital, tie strength and trust, considered to have major impact in the eWOM creation (Shu-Chuan and Yoojung 2011). Previous studies have already researched and tested the aforementioned variables. For instance, Burgee (2009) investigated how social ties associate to eWOM among college students by analyzing rating in RateMyProfessor.com. The results showed that tie-strength of information source affects the student’s decision. Dellarocas (2003) studied online opinion mechanisms and found that in online mediums, like eBay, are a valuable

communication channel to build customers trust, thus facilitating the creation of eWOM. Pigg and Crank (2004) and later Choi et al. (2011) analyzed social capital in SNSs, finding that it encourages the spread of eWOM. Also, Ellison et al. (2007) conclude that there is an association between SNSs and social capital, being the strongest to bridging social capital.

Social relationship dimensions are postulated to serve as preeminent variables in determining consumer's eWOM behavior on SNSs and to exert differential influences cross-culturally. From a cultural perspective, the nature and guiding principle for social relationships may vary from culture to culture and will continue to be reflected in each analyzed environment (Chu and Choi 2011). Social capital is referred to the resources accumulated through relationships among people (Coleman 1988). Therefore, it boosts the quantity and quality transferred thru social communication (Huang, Choi, and Horowitz 2010).

On one hand, bonding social capital is linked with the strong ties, which are connections among groups with similar characteristics: social or ethnic. (Pigg and Crank 2004; Leonard and Onyx 2003). Narayan (1999) states that bonding capital may be strengthening social norms which encourage inequality and stratification, proving correlation with high-power distance levels of both countries. Confirming the above-mentioned, social norms are related to bonding social capital, correlating also with high-level of uncertainty avoidance cultures (Onyx and Bullen 2000). On the other hand, bridging capital is linked to weak ties, loose connections among individuals that provide information without any emotional connection (Granovetter 1973). In this case, collectivist cultures with in-group orientation, value peer to peer support; maintain close family ties and loyalty in organizations can be associated with bonding capital. Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

*H2: Portuguese and Ecuadorians will gain more bonding social capital in SNSs than bridging social capital.*

Trust and tie strength are positively associated with user's overall eWOM behavior, plus it has been determined to be the focal dimension that characterizes the nature of social relationships influencing WOM dynamics (Shu-Chuan and Yoojung 2011). Trust has a significant role in the online environment

because it allows users to evaluate and justify their decisions with more useful information, like reviews or comments. Also, a higher level of trust reflects a higher intention to exchange information in SNSs (Pigg and Crank 2004). As a result, there is an increase in eWOM behavior via SNSs when users have reliability and trust their social connections (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 1998; Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze 2002). Similarly, with consumer's mutual agreement to become friends and join each other network, connections are perceived as more credible and trustworthy than unknown sources or classic advertisement. The degree of trust in social network contacts may be related to the predominant cultural orientation from each user (Chu and Choi 2011). Ergo, Portugal and Ecuador both display a high level of uncertainty avoidance, mostly Portugal with a score of 99, meaning that trust is very important in information search, as follows in the decision-making process in order ensure assurance and consistency. Accordingly, Portugal and Ecuador are likely to engage in eWOM as it is a more trustworthy network site, where users can share ideas to their "friend's" list, users they choose to connect and not any impersonal marketing campaign. This lead to the third hypothesis:

*H3: Portuguese and Ecuadorians have similar levels of trust with their contacts on Facebook.*

Tie strength is "the potency of the bond between members of a network", classified as weak or strong (Granovetter 1973). Strong ties are family and friends, whereas, weak ties are less personal relationships with acquaintances and colleagues. Is important to mention that strong ties are related with bonding social capital, implying reciprocity and support (Pigg and Crank 2004). Therefore, to build up the understanding of the role of culture is important to explore how cultural orientations relate to tie strength. According to Shu-Chuan et al. (2011), tie strength is highly positively associated with overall eWOM behavior. Therefore, as proposed before that Portuguese engaged in a higher level of opinion giving, the following hypothesis is proposed.

*H4: Portuguese users show a higher level of perceived tie strength on Facebook than Ecuadorian users.*

Nowadays is valuable to understand eWOM in social network sites, since it has the potential to reach people globally rapidly and simple. Hence, as examined above social relationships influences are more likely to influence eWOM communication among SNSs users. In order to better learn and comprehend how these variables affect the engagement and creation of eWOM on Facebook and how they might vary across cultures, the following research question is proposed:

*What factors influence electronic word-of-mouth behavior on Facebook and what are the cultural differences or similarities between Portugal and Ecuador?*

### **Methodology**

A self-administered online survey was conducted in order to test the hypothesized relationships between the key variables of eWOM on Facebook. The two samples chosen for the study were Portugal and Ecuador. As this report is a follow-up study from a previous research, it was pertinent to increase the sample of Portuguese to compare and have more information to contribute to the study. Furthermore, to contribute with the literature and add a new perspective, Ecuador was added to the study. The final sample was composed of Ecuadorian and Portuguese Millennials, representing nowadays the largest segment of SNSs users and considered to influence society into a new world of information sharing thru social media and mobile technology (Mangold and Smith 2012; Zhang, Abound Omran, and Cobanoglu 2017).

### **Sample**

A total of 305 respondents from Portugal and Ecuador registered and participated in the research. The sample after eliminating incomplete responses was reduced to 203 voluntary responses. Still, 6 participants indicated to be from another nationality rather than Portuguese or Ecuadorian. Likewise, 5 respondents specified not to have a Facebook account, both cases were not considered in the analysis. To ensure the grasp in SNSs, focusing on Facebook, the link to the survey was posted in several Facebook groups in Portugal and Ecuador. The final sample was 192 respondents, 45% male and 55% female. Participants age range from 21 to 35 years old, all part of Generation Y. The final Ecuadorian sample consisted of 145 surveys, 52% female, and 48% male. Besides, the final Portuguese sample consisted of 47 complete answers, 66% females and 34% male, unfortunately, 67 surveys were not finished. Lastly,

all respondents were required to answer honestly all the questions, plus, they were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

## **Measures**

The questionnaire was constructed to understand and determine electronic word-of-mouth engagement behavior on Facebook and the social relationships variables explained in the literature review. To expand the research and compare with Portuguese respondents another geography was added, Ecuador. Additionally, questions and scales were matched from Hurter (2017) and Chu and Choi (2011) to maintain the consistency of the study. The specific measures conducted in the survey and reliability coefficients are presented in the Appendix C: Measures and Cronbach's Alpha.

Opinion giving, opinion seeking, and opinion passing. Constructs were measured with 6 different items each, using 7-point Likert scales ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Is important to point out that questions two, four and six in opinion giving and seeking were recorded for the analysis. The Cronbach's coefficients for these constructs are: 0.660, 0.781, 0.90, respectively; all above 0.7 with the exception of opinion giving. Finally, the purpose of the questions was to measure respondent's actual tendency towards eWOM (Chu and Choi 2011).

Social capital. To measure social capital two constructs were built, first bridging social capital with 10 statements; second bonding social capital with other 10 statements. At the end, 20-items, 7-point Likert scale varying from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” gauge social capital in SNSs. The Cronbach's coefficient for these constructs are: 0.898 for bridging and 0.854 for bonding social capital. Lastly, questions three and nine were recorded for the analysis.

Trust. The variable was evaluated using a 7-point Likert scale extending from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, in order to recognize trust of the respondents with their SNSs contacts (Chu and Choi 2011). The construct indicated a 0.910 reliability coefficient and was analyzed by measuring 7 items related directly to the variable.

Tie strength. By adopting measures from previous researchers (Reingen and Kernan 1986; Brown and Reingen 1987; Norman and Russell 2006) 3 crucial aspects related to tie-strength were measured.

First, the frequency of use was measured with a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “never” equal 1 and “very frequently” equal to 7. Second, importance was also measured with a 7-point Likert scale with 1 being “not at all important” and 7 being “very important”. Thirdly, closeness 7-point Likert scaled varied from “not at all close” to “very close”. Lastly, the Cronbach’s coefficient for this construct is: 0.796 proving reliability of the items measured.

## Results

Prior to the analysis of the results, scales were calculated for each construct by adding up all the items per construct and next calculating the average. Firstly, in order to test the hypotheses proposed, independent sample t-tests were calculated for each construct, considering the variations of the mean values between Ecuador and Portugal (See table 2). Moreover, a correlation and regression analyses were conducted to measure the relationship between the three behaviors of eWOM engagement and the social relationship variables.

### Hypotheses Testing

**Opinion seeking, giving and passing (H1a-c).** According to the prediction that Ecuadorians and Portuguese engage in a similar level of opinion giving behavior, there were no significant differences in scores for Ecuador ( $M = 3.60$ ;  $SD = 0.97$ ) and Portugal ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ;  $t(65.17) = 1.28$ ,  $p = 0.206$ ), thus supporting H1a. On the other hand, as regards to the hypothesis H1b, were Portuguese seem to engage more in opinion seeking there were no differences between Portuguese and Ecuadorian samples in this construct. More in detail, Ecuador ( $M = 3.40$ ;  $SD = 1.28$ ) and Portugal ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ;  $t(190) = 0.90$ ,  $p = 0.370$ ), thus H1b was not sustained. At last for opinion passing there were no significant differences between the means of both cultures, Ecuador ( $M = 3.44$ ;  $SD = 1.52$ ) and Portugal ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ;  $t(190) = 0.35$ ,  $p = 0.729$ ), thereby confirming H1c.

**Social Capital (H2).** The second hypothesis suggests that Ecuadorians and Portuguese engage in bonding social capital in a similar level due to their collective traits, in-group orientation and individual’s loyalty and support. There was no significant difference in scores for Ecuador ( $M = 4.07$ ;  $SD = 1.18$ ) and Portugal ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ;  $t(190) = -1.23$ ,  $p = 0.221$ ). In contrast, in bridging social capital the means



are different from the two groups, for Ecuador ( $M=4.96$ ;  $SD=1.21$ ) and Portugal ( $M=4.63$ ,  $SD=0.83$ ;  $t(113.86)=2.10$ ,  $p=0.038$ ). Hence, Ecuadorian SNS users reported gaining a greater level of bridging social capital in SNSs than Portuguese users, disconfirming H2.

**Trust (H3).** To further examine the third hypothesis another t-test was computed to compared SNSs user's trust in their contacts. The hypothesis proposes that Portuguese and Ecuadorians users have a similar level of trust in their Facebook contacts. The t-test analysis showed that was no significant difference in scores for Ecuador ( $M=4.26$ ;  $SD=1.25$ ) and Portugal ( $M=4.15$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ;  $t(190)=0.54$ ,  $p=0.587$ ), thus supporting the premise that Portuguese and Ecuadorians have similar levels of trust among their contacts on Facebook.

**Tie Strength (H4).** The last hypothesis aimed that Portuguese users show a higher level of perceived tie strength on Facebook that Portuguese users. Consistent with the prediction, the results of the independent sample t-test indicated: Portugal  $M=4.66$ ,  $SD=1.19$ , and Ecuador  $M=4.05$ ;  $SD=1.24$ ;  $t(190)=-2.98$ ,  $p=0.003$ ), means are significantly different. Therefore, H4 was supported.

	<u>Ecuador</u>		<u>Portugal</u>		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>		
Opinion Giving	3.60	0.97	3.34	1.24	1.28	65.17
Opinion Seeking	3.40	1.28	3.20	1.45	0.90	190
Opinion Passing	3.44	1.52	3.35	1.47	0.35	190
Bridging Social Capital	4.96	1.21	4.63	0.83	2.1**	113.86
Bonding Social Capital	4.07	1.18	4.31	1.13	-1.23	190
Trust	4.26	1.25	4.15	1.17	0.54	190
Perceived Tie Strength	4.05	1.24	4.66	1.19	-2.98**	190

Table 2. T-test Results of eWOM Engagement and Social Relationship Variables

**Research Question. – Impact of Social Relationship Variables on eWOM engagement.** A second step was a correlation analysis to explore the relationship between all the variables of the research (see Appendix D). Both Portugal and Ecuador presented large levels of correlation in all three variables related to eWOM engagement. First, the relationship between opinion giving and opinion seeking (Ecuador:  $r(143)=0.522$ ,  $p=0.000$ ; Portugal:  $r(45)=0.733$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Second, opinion giving and opinion passing (Ecuador:  $r(143)=0.587$ ,  $p=0.000$ ; Portugal:  $r(45)=0.649$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Third, between opinion seeking and opinion passing (Ecuador:  $r(143)=0.606$ ,  $p=0.000$ ; Portugal:  $r(45)=0.699$ ,  $p=$

0.000). All compared variables display strong, positive correlations. For instance, there was a strong, positive correlation between opinion giving and opinion passing in Portugal, meaning the more opinion seeking the more opinion passing and vice versa. In Ecuador, the strongest positive correlation was between opinion passing and opinion seeking, in other words, the more opinion seeking the more information users will transfer to its contacts.

In relation to eWOM behaviors and bridging social capital in Ecuador there was a small, positive correlation between opinion giving (Ecuador:  $r(143) = 0.299, p = 0.000$ ) and seeking (Ecuador:  $r(143) = 0.296, p = 0.000$ ). Further, there was a positive, medium correlation between bridging social capital and opinion passing (Ecuador:  $r(143) = 0.483, p = 0.000$ ). Conjointly, bonding social capital had the same small, positive relationship with opinion giving (Ecuador:  $r(143) = 0.200, p = 0.016$ ) and opinion passing (Ecuador:  $r(143) = 0.200, p = 0.016$ ), the more opinion giving or seeking there is a small relationship with bonding social capital. However, in Portugal there was a small correlation between opinion passing and bridging social capital (Portugal:  $r(45) = 0.336, p = 0.021$ ) and no correlation between bonding social capital and the three eWOM behaviors.

The variable trust had no influence on eWOM in Portugal, yet in Ecuador there was a small positive relationship between the two variables  $r(143) = 0.266, p = 0.001$ , opinion passing and trust. The previous may suggest, that users are more likely to share their opinions and ideas in a greater level if their trust their list of contacts. Lasting, regarding tie strength in Ecuador there was only a small correlation between the variable and opinion seeking  $r(143) = 0.191, p = 0.021$  and opinion passing  $r(143) = 0.220, p = 0.000$ , suggesting that small levels of opinion and passing may relate with small increase in the level of tie strength. Portugal, on the contrary has medium positive relationship between tie strength and opinion giving  $r(45) = 0.396, p = 0.006$ ; likewise, opinion seeking  $r(45) = 0.293, p = 0.046$  and opinion passing  $r(45) = 0.339, p = 0.02$  are positively correlated with tie strength in medium level of relationship.

As a third step of analysis in order to determine the relationship between eWOM in SNSs and social relationships three regression analyses were conducted, to recognize the degree in which opinion

giving, opinion seeking and passing are predicted by the social relationships variable analyzed above. Analyzing just the Ecuadorian users, bridging social capital ( $\beta = 0.249$ ,  $t = 3.081$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) was an only significant predictor of online opinion giving and opinion seeking behaviors ( $\beta = 0.266$ ,  $t = 2.466$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ). For passing along information, bridging ( $\beta = 0.490$ ,  $t = 4.223$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and bonding social capital ( $\beta = 0.238$ ,  $t = 1.993$ ,  $p = 0.048$ ) all appeared as significant predictors. Thusly, all three regression models for Ecuador were all significant at  $p < .05$ . Analyzing the two countries, the model suggested that bridging social capital was a significant predictor of SNSs user's engagement in opinion seeking in both Portugal ( $\beta = 0.776$ ,  $t = 2.922$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ) and Ecuador ( $\beta = 0.266$ ,  $t = 2.466$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ). However, the same variable was found only to be a predictor of opinion giving in Ecuador. Lastly, opinion passing behavior in electronic word-of-mouth among Portuguese users results pointed out a relationship with bonding social capital ( $\beta = -0.568$ ,  $t = -2.375$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ), meaning that an increase in bonding social capital will decrease somehow opinion passing behavior. Still, only for Portuguese users perceived tie-strength was consider a compelling predictor ( $\beta = 0.627$ ,  $t = 2.368$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ). Altogether, after analyzing each of the independent variables for each element of electronic word-of-mouth; the results showed both similarities and differences between Ecuador and Portugal in relation to the impact of social relationships variables (Social Capital, Tie Strength and Trust) in the engagement of eWOM. All the results are displayed in

Table 3.

	ECUADOR			PORTUGAL		
	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup> Adj.	F Statistic	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup> Adj.	F Statistic
<b><u>Opinion Giving</u></b>		0.085	4.34**		0.113	2.465
Bridging Social Capital	0.249**			0.114		
Bonding Social Capital	0.089			-0.206		
Trust	-0.139			-0.149		
Perceived Tie Strength	0.026			0.599		
<b><u>Opinion Seeking</u></b>		0.069	3.665**		0.186	3.63*
Bridging Social Capital	0.266*			0.776**		
Bonding Social Capital	0.059			-0.296		
Trust	-0.053			-0.139		
Perceived Tie Strength	0.094			0.387		
<b><u>Opinion Passing</u></b>		0.235	12.044***		0.186	3.629*
Bridging Social Capital	0.49***			0.525		
Bonding Social Capital	0.238*			-0.568*		
Trust	-0.012			-0.019		
Perceived Tie Strength	-0.008			0.627*		

Table 3. Regression results Ecuador and Portugal

## Discussion

Nowadays, consumers with only one click can easily share product information thru their social network without geographic and time constraints. As an emerging and significant group, Generation Y is seen as a precursor of how users may behave in the future market and in the decision-making process. The majority of technology experts believe that Millennials will drive societies into a new world of information sharing thru social media and mobile technology. Likewise, Millennials for the past years have been seen as innovators, early adopters, and influencers in this field. Accordingly, for the purpose of analyzing specifically this specific group, an online questionnaire was used to determine the factors that guide user's motivations to engage in electronic word-of-mouth.

**Theoretical implications.** Analyzing eWOM engagement levels, the results didn't display compelling differences between Portugal and Ecuador. Considering the similarities of culture traits in both countries, Facebook users were found to engage in a parallel way in opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing. The aforementioned relates and is corroborated by the strong correlation between the variables plus how collectivist cultures have more willingness to engage in eWOM. In accordance to Fong (2008), the findings confirmed that users from collective cultures may be more willing to seek and respond to eWOM, encouraging information sharing and a high trust on personal information.

In regard to social capital, contrary to the prediction based on previous literature Chu and Choi (2011); Pigg and Crank (2004) in which bonding capital was mostly associated with strong ties, therefore with collectivist cultures was disconfirmed in this study. Ecuadorian Facebook users gain more bridging social capital compared to Portuguese. Both cultures engage more in bridging social capital than bonding social capital, differing to the prediction. Additionally, Portuguese gain more bonding social capital, even though Ecuador is the second most collectivistic culture in the world. Withal, the fact that both cultures engage in a similar level in bonding social capital, yet, lower than bridging it may be associated with the fact the social variable influence the behavior of opinion passing.

As predicted, both societies have a similar level of trust in their Facebook contacts. According to Shu-Chuan and Yoojung (2011), tie strength and trust are positively associated with SNSs user's overall

eWOM behavior, therefore information sharing. Similarly, it's been proven that the level of trust represents a significant role in an individual's decision to connect with other networks and exchange information. Another aspect that confirms the expected behavior is that both countries reveal high levels of uncertainty avoidance, indicating that is highly important to find trustful sources of information prior to engaging in eWOM. Comparing the social variable tie-strength between Portuguese and Ecuadorian Facebook users, a significant difference in the mean values was displayed. Thus, revealing that Portuguese users may have a greater bond and connection with their list of Facebook "friends" in comparison to Ecuadorian users. As well, is important to point out that that the variable showed a medium positive correlation with all eWOM behaviors, contrary to Ecuador that displayed a small positive correlation only with opinion seeking and passing. In addition, the fact that Portuguese users have a strong tie-strength with their friends and acquaintances maybe because Portuguese Millennials are more used to communicate via Facebook platforms whether, in Ecuador, Millennials use other platforms to chat with their friends and colleagues. For instance, WhatsApp.

Moreover, some interesting findings were discovered in relation to the influence of social capital, tie strength, and trust in eWOM behavior. Bridging social capital evidenced a significant relationship in all three types of eWOM behaviors in Ecuador. However, in Portugal, it only influenced opinion seeking behavior. Further in the analysis, for Ecuadorian users, bonding social capital exhibited a medium positive correlation among all three opinion behaviors. Differently, for Portuguese users this construct has no connection with either opinion passing, seeking or giving. Withal, considering all the constructs there is no exhibit of negative association among any of the variables, also all three eWOM behaviors are related to each other. In other words, if users are inclined to participate in opinion giving, there is a high likelihood that they will engage in opinion passing and seeking, and vice versa.

At last, to understand which variables may act as predictors of each of the eWOM behavior, another analysis was developed. In the final results, there were several differences that arise between the two groups. In both, Ecuador and Portugal 24% and 19% respectively of the total variability of the variable

opinion passing is explained in the model by social relationship variables. Being in Ecuador, bridging and bonding social capital variables, whereas in Portugal only bonding social capital and tie strength. Continuing with the remaining two behaviors opinion giving and opinion seeking the independent variable bridging social capital explained the models in Ecuador by 8.5% and in Portugal by 6.5%. Certainly, it is curious how the variable tie strength is not a predictor of the consumers intention to give information in the social network site, this may be related that now with the rapidness and how easy is to share information online, collective cultures with high UAI stop for a minute to think twice whether or not to share the information. However, is important to consider that trust in neither of the countries has a strong connection or acts as a predictor to the model, hence it does not affect significantly in the way user give or pass information.

**Managerial implications.** This research provides with practical implications not only for global marketing but to cross-cultural studies. Noticing that both cultures have similar levels of trust, marketers could emphasize in generation more buzz marketing, fostering an exchange of information between users. Likewise, the high levels of trust that both cultures displayed reflect that Facebook users trust the recommendations from their “friend” list in their SNSs. Even though this variable was not a predictor, in neither of eWOM behaviors, marketers should still focus on fomenting a trustful environment where users can share freely and openly their comments and reviews, considering that Portugal and Ecuador are collective cultures and their cultural traits have shown in many studies that trustworthiness is crucial for the interaction between individuals.

Brand managers in both countries should take into consideration the importance and the rapid grow of social network sites and try to identify social influencers that can post recommendations or invite users to engage more in eWOM. Thus, users that were not 100% sure of the trustworthiness of the platform after seeing social influencers and their peers are starting to engage more and more, they will also do it. Further, for digital marketers being able to understand both the cultural background and the motivation of the brand/product users, is crucial when creating targeted marketing campaigns and communication

strategies. Therefore, in order to have an effective approach, all the previous variables should be considered. Lastly, in order to propagate more the marketing campaign digital marketers should increase the eagerness and enthusiasm of SNSs user to engage in electronic word-of-mouth; as a consequence, not only marketing messages will be spread faster and easily but trustful recommendation from peers will be available for consumers on the Web, having as a final result also an increase in consumers within the loyalty loop.

**Limitations and future research.** After evaluating all the results, some limitations arouse and should be taken into consideration. Although Millennials represent a vast percentage of SNSs users, they do not reflect exactly all the perceptions of the total population. Also, the sample of Portuguese Millennials was rather small compared with the counterpart that was bigger, yet for the analysis it was considered sufficient. Ergo, the results cannot be considered as representative for the whole populations of both countries in terms of age and societal diversity. For future research, in order to conclude the influence of culture in the engagement of eWOM more nationalities and different generations of users should be consider in future studies. As well as, new research contemplating the investigation in how to increase and persuade user's that already participate constantly in eWOM to engage more and become social influencers in the future.

### **Conclusion**

After the analysis of the data collected from, the study disclosed that there are no significant differences between Ecuadorian and Portuguese Facebook users in how they behave when engaging in electronic worth-of-mouth. Users from both cultures carry out the same amount of opinion giving, seeking and passing, with no significant differences between the variables. On the other hand, contrarily as predicted Ecuadorians gain more of bridging social capital than Portuguese users. This is interesting since it was expected that collective cultures will gain more bonding than bridging social capital due to the association with strong ties. Also, Portugal users gain more bonding social capital than Ecuadorians, although Ecuador is the second culture with the highest level of collectivism after Guatemala. Findings also revealed differences in how users perceive the relationship with the people in their network and the

strength of the connection to their Facebook contacts. Lastly, different variables like, social capital and tie strength were found to predict the behavior of certain eWOM traits, allowing marketers to develop targeted strategies to increase the engagement of eWOM.

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